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Media Considerations in Art Therapy: Directions for Future Research

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The word *medium* has various meanings, all of which have implications for art therapy. Medium can be defined as: (1) something in a middle position; (2) a means of effecting or conveying something: as a mode of artistic expression or communication; and (3) a condition or environment in which something may function or flourish (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Media in art therapy have functioned in all aspects of the definition: as objects in the middle of the relationship between client and therapist, and as a bridge between client's inner self and the outer world (Peterson, 2010). Media have been a means of expression and communication for those who are unable or unwilling to talk (Cruz, 2011; Rubin, 2011). Art media provide the conditions through which clients may flourish (Moon, 2010). Given the pivotal role of media in art therapy, elucidating their healing properties is essential for advancing the field. Research must support art therapists' choices of media and their differential applications in therapy.

Art therapy is not always benign; materials and processes can be harmful (Springham, 2008; Vick & Sexton-Radek, 2009). Consequently, ongoing attention to the choice and implementation of media is an ethical responsibility (Moon, 2006). Art therapists are obliged to understand media properties in order to safeguard clients' well-being and to promote excellent therapeutic outcomes. Understanding media properties will aid art therapists in choosing optimal materials for each unique client or situation, as well as in opening minds to alternative media that best fit client needs. This chapter explores media properties, media fit, and unconventional media uses in art therapy. Directions for future research are proposed in each subject area.

Media Properties

Early in the history of art therapy, media were described as possessing inherent qualities that affect the way they are perceived and used (Betensky, 1973; Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978; Robbins & Sibley, 1976). Pioneer art therapist Margaret Naumburg

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believed that positive therapeutic outcomes could be achieved solely through the use of pastels and poster paints (Naumburg, 1966). Robbins and Sibley (1976) on the other hand, stressed the importance of offering an ample assortment of media and of appreciating the "psychology of materials" (p. 207). The authors explained that each material has a stimulus potential, or capacity to activate a unique response in the user. They suggested that art therapists become familiar with the potential for media to stimulate through texture, color, movement and rhythm, and boundaries. In addition, they counseled art therapists to attend to the risk-taking potential of media, their concrete or abstract potential, and their ability to evoke mastery and control. These themes have been elaborated by others (Hinz, 2009; Horowitz & Eksten, 2009; Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978; Lusebrink, 1990; Rubin, 2011), but very little research confirms such media properties.

Most commonly, art therapists have referenced a continuum of fluid to resistive media characteristics capable of evoking thought, behavior, and emotion (Kagin, 1969, as cited in Lusebrink, 1990). Media with more inherent structure are called *resistive* because they resist easy alteration. The use of resistive materials in art therapy is likely to promote a considered and thoughtful experience. Media that are easily manipulated and altered, and thus more difficult to control, are termed *fluid*. Using fluid media, such as watercolor paints and chalk pastels, is likely to arouse emotion (Betensky, 1973; Horowitz & Eksten, 2009; Robbins & Sibley, 1976; Rubin, 2011). Fluid media also are hypothesized to access unconscious processes, mediated on a preverbal level by the right hemisphere of the brain, and thus aid in the integration of long-term memory (Morley & Duncan, 2007) and trauma recovery (Gantt & Tinnin, 2009). When using 2D materials, fluid/resistive media properties interact with paper texture to modify the emotional/cognitive nature of the expression (Robbins & Sibley, 1976; Seiden, 2001). The fluid/resistive continuum is a foundation upon which the work of art therapy is built and, as new media become more widely used, art therapists might have to augment its definition. Computer artists may face a particular type of resistance as they endeavor to translate their ideas into computer programs and resulting products (Austin, 2010).

The discussion of media characteristics was expanded to include the fundamental structure of materials (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978). Media with a solid composition, such as wood or mosaic tiles, are called highly structured or *boundary-determined media*, and are hypothesized to provide a safe, controlled, and nonthreatening art therapy experience. Materials with no inherent boundaries, such as watercolor paint, are *quantity-determined*. The amount of the medium limits their use, and therefore if an individual is responsive to the emotional qualities of a fluid medium, adding more of the medium would increase the emotional experience. In addition, paper has fundamental boundaries that furnish a limit-setting function (Lusebrink, 1990). Smaller paper can be provided as one way to limit or contain the ideas or affects expressed (Hinz, 2006). Orr (2010) extended the discussion of media properties to include time, accessibility, and social significance, which are especially important in digital media applications. Providing evidence to support the existence of inherent media properties is a direction for future study; understanding these dimensions will guide effective treatment.

Researchers have demonstrated the general efficacy of art therapy interventions to relieve anxiety and reduce negative mood (e.g., Bell & Robbins, 2007; Curl, 2008; Curry & Kasser, 2005; Drake, Coleman & Winner, 2011; Drake & Winner, 2012; Henderson, Rosen, & Mascaro, 2007; Kersten & van der Vennet, 2010; Kimport & Robbins, 2012; Sandmire, Gorham, Rankin, & Grimm, 2012; van der Vennet & Serice, 2012; Wood, Molassiotis, & Payne, 2011). In one study, creating collage images was associated with decreased negative mood, but merely viewing and sorting pictures was not (Bell & Robbins, 2007). Drake et al. (2011) compared writing and drawing (both with black pen) to ameliorate negative mood and found significantly more positive effects for drawing than writing. Curl (2008) studied the effects of drawing and collage, carried out with either a positive or negative mental framework, and found that both art tasks, paired with a positive cognitive focus, reduced stress. The lack of a differential effect of medium could be attributed to the art tasks studied: both were relatively cognitive tasks unlikely to evoke differential emotional (i.e., stress-reducing) responses. In another study, students anticipating final exams who created art for 30 minutes demonstrated significantly less anxiety than a control group. Although students were allowed a free choice of art materials (mandala coloring, painting, collage, clay, drawing), no main effect of media was noted, probably due to the small and uneven numbers of students in each condition (Sandmire et al., 2012).

Trying to understand more fully the effects of media properties themselves, Crane (2010) studied the stress-reducing effects of working with pencil, clay, and watercolor paint. She found that after 20 minutes of working with materials, all subjects rated themselves as significantly less anxious than prior to the task. The smallest effect was seen in the pencil condition, which the author hypothesized was due to its resistive nature. The greatest reduction in self-rated anxiety was seen in the clay condition, which was attributed to its tension-releasing properties. In another attempt to understand specific media properties, Ichiki (2012) surveyed 74 American art therapists and 106 Japanese psychologists using art in therapy (Japan does not have an art therapy specialization) about media preferences, media use, and media properties. Analysis of the data demonstrated three distinct healing factors operating through media: one involved movement, sensation, rhythm, and playfulness; the second involved cognitive control and conscious thought, and the last, use of symbols. The research documented that different art media were associated with each factor. Clay was most highly associated with movement and playfulness, and pencil with cognitive control. These studies indicate that art therapists are beginning to provide evidence for the unique healing effects of various materials. Because media and materials are fundamental to the field of art therapy, this is an area of research that deserves significant further inquiry. When media properties are established, art therapists will be closer to confirming evidence-based treatments.

Media Fit

The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) is a theoretical framework describing and prescribing how clients interact with media to process information and form images (see Chapter 6, titled "Expressive Therapies Continuum," by Vija B. Lusebrink in this volume). This structure can help therapists determine which media clients are

drawn to and therefore will work best in the initial art therapy sessions. Other considerations in media fit include, but are not limited to, gender, culture, and age.

Gender Differences

Gender differences in the content of art images have been demonstrated (Silver, 1993, 2003), but there has been little attention to other gender differences or preferences in art therapy. Art therapy proved effective in decreasing depression in male and female prison inmates, with interesting gender differences noted (Gussak, 2009). Therapeutic effects were stronger for females who benefitted from the cooperative art therapy *process*. In contrast, males were competitive with one another about the art *product*, and received fewer therapeutic effects. According to Trombetta (2007), males prefer making comic strips, tattoo art, and graffiti-like images. He added that the use of clay with men allows for the release and expression of pent-up aggression related to depression, and that scribble drawings can contain anxiety as well as help discharge and transform previously unexpressed aggression.

Writing about how to engage boys in treatment, Cruz (2011) discussed the use of graffiti as a particularly effective intervention. The author further explained that boys like to observe how things work and become enthusiastic about using tools such as metal sheers, drills, saws, and hammers. Cruz (2011) added that wood and stone have a natural appeal to boys who enjoy sculpture and construction with found objects from neighborhoods, cities, or nature.

The use of fiber arts in therapy has focused on the healing nature of these traditional materials and processes with women (Collier, 2011a, 2011b; Huss, 2010; Moxley, Feen-Calligan, Washington, & Garriott, 2011; Reynolds, 1999, 2000, 2002). Fiber arts have been shown to increase relaxation, soothe fears, distract from intrusive thoughts, build self-esteem, increase perceived control and social support, and transform illness experiences (Reynolds, 1999, 2000, 2002). Collier (2011a) found that women reported the spontaneous use of textile arts such as knitting and weaving to decrease negative mood, distract, and rejuvenate. The use of fiber arts can increase meditative, communication, and problem-solving skills (Huss, 2010). Art therapists can assist women in making their fiber art deliberately metaphorical and personally expressive through the combined use of guided imagery and expressive writing (Collier, 2011b).

This brief review of the different responses of women and men to media could be interpreted to mean that the majority of media work effectively with all clients. However, determining gender-related media preferences should not be based solely on clinical experience. It is an empirical question that deserves further examination to determine how to construct best practices.

Cultural Applications

It is essential that art therapists are educated about the specific cultural groups that they will come into contact with and about how art therapy can be uniquely helpful to them. For the disenfranchised client, art potentially can offer a powerful voice that

previously has been disregarded, ignored, or intentionally silenced (Hinz, 2006). Further, it is imperative that art therapists explore and understand how cultural differences influence clients' comfort level with art media and, to the best of their ability, supply culturally sensitive materials (Moon, 2006). In addition, art therapists should be aware that clients' level of acculturation can affect media choices as much as primary culture (Shaked, 2009). Cultural competence includes using easily accessible and obtainable materials, so that participants will continue to engage in art making after therapy is terminated (Moon, 2010). Acculturation, art therapist cultural competence, and client cultural preferences in media are topics deserving of further exploration to ensure the provision of excellent art therapy services.

Age Differences

Alders and Levine-Madori (2010) achieved improved cognitive functioning in elderly adults using a variety of materials; the logical next step in the research process would be to distinguish differential effects of media on cognitive performance. For example, elderly clients with dementia respond well to sensory-stimulating materials that can reduce sensory deprivation and aid memory reconstitution (Hinz, 2009; Lusebrink, 1990).

Child and adolescent clients enjoy various media, particularly digital applications: digital photography, video production, video gaming, and computer-assisted art applications (Austin, 2010; Orr, 2005). Children and adolescents can be particularly responsive to the use of film to stimulate metaphorical art related to life themes (Gramaglia et al., 2011; Marsick, 2010). Austin (2010) urges art therapists working with adolescents to adopt and embrace technological applications that are relevant to adolescents and to be at the forefront of their development.

Unconventional Media

Moon (2010) noted that media in art therapy usually have been confined to long-established domains such as drawing, painting and sculpture. However, a recent survey demonstrated that art therapists believe that any medium that can safely produce change should be considered for use (Peterson, 2010). Moon (2010) added that the use of nontraditional materials is more sustainable in countries where art supplies are not readily available and where even trash is devoid of useable materials such as old magazines. In addition, Moon (2010) attempted to raise awareness that sometimes alternative media better convey meaning even when more traditional supplies are at hand. Art therapists are encouraged to discover, document, and disseminate information on the healing properties of diverse materials.

Certain qualities of unconventional media can make them more suitable than traditional media for the expression of unique concerns and conflicts. For example, Hunter (2012) suggested the use of handbags, shoes, and Barbie dolls as some of the media through which complex body image work can best be undertaken. According to Feen-Calligan, McIntyre, and Sands-Goldstein (2009), identity and body image

issues easily arise through the use of dolls. Moreover, dolls can help female clients connect with mothering, nurturing, and femininity concerns. Working with homeless adults, Davis (1997) encouraged participants to create house sculptures using scrap wood from demolished houses. For the participants, scraps from demolished buildings powerfully represented the destruction that had taken place, both literally and symbolically, in their lives.

Found objects are contemporary and sustainable. Their use in art can convey the ordinary turned extraordinary, and reduce the pressures of perfection (Seiden, 2001). In a recent review, Camic, Brooker, and Neal (2011) reported that found objects can increase therapeutic engagement, emotional identification, and transformation. They hypothesized that the functions of found objects in art therapy are to help establish a sense of self, increase confidence and containment, evoke memories and emotions, and act as symbols for healing. Also, in their quests for useable objects, clients are active *in* the environment and act as positive agents *on* the environment.

Discarded books are a form of found object transformed to new life through painting, drawing, or collaging pages (Chilton, 2007). Words can be highlighted as poetry or prose to enhance the experience (Cobb & Negash, 2010). Because of their association with history, biography, and memoir, using books as media can help clients reflect on their lives and organize their personal stories (Cobb & Negash, 2010; Kohut, 2011). Books have an inherent and expected structure that can guide their use as media, and, at the same time, reworking books can afford a safe way to rebel against convention. Their structure invites opening and closing and can supply a sense of containment (Chilton, 2007).

Findlay, Latham, and Hass-Cohen (2008) found that the use of textiles in art therapy calls forth tactile sensory experiences embodied in attachment styles: blankets were used by children to demonstrate the warmth of secure attachment, whereas unpredictable textures were indicative of insecure parent–child bonds. Beyond their individually therapeutic applications, textiles have been used in community action programs (Timm-Bottos, 2011).

Weiser (2004) has been an advocate for the use of photographs in art therapy to capture the immediacy of affective experiences. According to the author, photos as media are the most publicly familiar and emotionally powerful of all artistic media. Photos can provide alternate views of the self, and they are perceived as both "realistic illusion and illusory reality" (p. 26). Although photos have been used for quite some time in therapy, little research exists to support their use. The advent of digital photography and editing software allows for simple and nearly instantaneous creative manipulation of images, and these new applications require renewed research efforts (Wolf, 2007).

Although computers are an essential part of the lives of many clients and art therapists, their use in art therapy has been greatly debated (Orr, 2010). Computers have been alternately derided as impersonal and lacking important tactile qualities, and lauded for their use in helping disabled or isolated persons access the creative process (Orr, 2005). In two recent surveys, art therapists who were asked to consider adopting digital media were less concerned with their digital nature and more concerned with their therapeutic possibilities (Mihailidis et al., 2010; Peterson, 2010). New computer applications being developed include handheld devices with finger

paint, collage, and flipbook animation, as well as distance art therapy groups (Collie & Čubranić, 2002). Collie and Čubranić used a computer-based painting program as the medium through which group members created art. Audio and video connections were the platforms through which artwork was processed and shared. The authors assumed that the impersonal nature of computers and the lack of face-to-face contact would reduce participant engagement in computer-assisted distance group art therapy, but found the opposite. They concluded that computers increasingly will be used to reach isolated and disabled elderly clients.

It is possible that contemporary art therapy consumers, expecting to influence their world through digital participation, will actively engage in digital art therapy processes (Orr, 2010). The use of computers for gaining and sharing information, and for artistic purposes, can increase self-respect, communication, and social bonding among formerly homeless clients, and also serve as a powerful facilitator of social justice (Stotrocki, Andrews, & Saemundsdottir, 2004). Spring et al. (2011) successfully used computers to remotely include chronically ill group members when they were no longer physically able to participate.

Although their use in art therapy has been contested, computers will likely see greater use in the future. Austin (2010) discusses a time when the interface between product and user will mimic more traditional art media, not involving a mouse or keyboard. He urges art therapists to champion the use of computers and to be on the cutting edge of development.

Conclusion

Art therapy is founded upon the use of media; however, there exists surprisingly little research demonstrating the differential effects of materials. Until quite recently, material use has remained relatively constant and unquestioned. Materials were assumed to possess certain characteristics that determined their choice for use in therapy (Lusebrink, 1990; Seiden, 2001). The field currently operates on the basis of clinical observations regarding the nature of media: fluid vs. resistive, boundary vs. quantity determined, traditional vs. alternative materials; and some of these assumptions are beginning to be tested (e.g., Crane, 2010; Ichiki, 2012). As the discipline matures, art therapy is in need of empirical evidence to direct and support the use of media. Expanding this research will provide the required foundation for evidenced-based practice. In addition, the number of materials used in art therapy has increased and expanded, and will continue to evolve. Art therapists should be at the forefront of providing evidence for the uses of media—new and old.

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